

the status of citizenship and nationality in Britain. The Act particularly hit many immigrants from the former colonies who were already struggling due to Thatcher's economic policies. Therefore the riots in 1981 were partially racially motivated, as many people in the areas in question felt doubly marginalised. Last year's riots were not racially motivated, although a number of Black Britons living in the troubled areas took part in them.

Conclusion

Even though it is hard to pinpoint what the exact reasons for last year's riots were, it seems apparent that the majority of them may be found within the structures of British society. Some of these structures are clearly rooted in the country's history and have developed over time, while others, like the current financial crisis for example, are more obviously contemporary. Furthermore, there is no doubt that many of the activities which took place during those August days were criminal and that the people involved should be punished accordingly. However, it seems too short-sighted to write off these groups as criminal elements and avoid exploring the complex backcloth any further. It is the job of the politicians to go beyond the surface and investigate how to engage these marginalised groups in constructive dialogue in order to try to improve their situation. In the 1980s they were left to fend for themselves, and at the moment of writing the pattern seems to be repeating itself. It is one thing to describe the illness, but if you do not analyse the diagnosis, you cannot be expected to be able to prescribe the correct medication.

Read St!

Abigail

Stephen Kelman's novel *Pigeon English*, shortlisted for the Man Booker prize last year, gives Norwegian readers an opportunity to step outside the comfort zone of "London for tourists". His novel is set on a council estate in South London and is narrated by 11-year-old Harri Opuka, who has recently immigrated to London from Ghana. Harri's innocent curiosity makes for a vivid and unvarnished depiction of how he and his family try to carve out a new life for themselves in an area where poverty, crime and social problems prevail. Fortunately, Harri embraces his new life as if it were all one great adventure:

The buildings are all mighty round here. My tower is as high as the lighthouse in Jamestown. There are three towers all in a row: Luxembourg House, Stockholm House and Copenhagen House. My I live in Copenhagen House. My flat is on floor 9 out of 14. It's not even hutious*, I can look from the window now and my belly doesn't even turn over. I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast. (* frightening)

Needless to say his life in London contrasts sharply with his former life in Ghana, which he refers to simply as "where I used to live". Although Harri makes many keen observations about his new surroundings and the local residents in his area, many of whom are alcoholics, drug addicts or mentally ill, he is never defeated by the misery and deprivation around him.

What saves him from becoming brutalised and cynical is his immaturity. He does not understand the full implications of what goes

on around him and in this way he is shielded from at least some of the harsh realities that an inner city childhood entail. Because of this he is an unreliable yet infinitely charming narrator, and much of the novel's appeal is to be found exactly in this discrepancy between Harri's limited understanding of his own situation and the reader's more comprehensive knowledge. We cannot help smiling at Harri's childish preoccupations and naïve remarks as he struggles to find his place in the urban jungle.

Even when Harri experiences something deeply traumatic his tone remains matter of fact. A boy he knows has been killed outside a fried chicken shop and Harry is looking at the scene of the crime. There is blood on the pavement and a police tape saying "Do not cross". Stoically, Harri thinks about his relationship to this boy and wonders what he might do about it:

Me and the dead boy were only half friends, I didn't see him very much because he was older and he didn't go to my school. He could ride his bike with no hands and you never even wanted him to fall off. I said a prayer for him inside my head. It just said sorry. That was all I could remember. I pretended like if I kept looking hard enough I could make the blood move and go back in the shape of a boy. I could bring him back alive that way. It happened before, where I used to live there was a chief who brought his son back like that. It was a long time ago, before I was born. Asweh*, it was a miracle. It didn't work this time. (*I swear)

Many of Harri's most notable features are apparent in this extract – he is a doer, somebody who wants to make a difference. An incurable optimist with a strong belief in the supernatural, he even thinks that if he applies himself to it, he may actually succeed in

Pigeon English – the immigrant experience in contemporary London

by Siri Hunstadbråten, Drammen vgs.

As has been seen by now, Harri's life is full of insecurity and challenges, yet he seems to cope surprisingly well, at least for a while. He relies on his family for support, not least his father and his baby sister who have yet to join Harri, his mother and sister in London. He cherishes the telephone conversations he has with his family in Ghana and when his new life is too demanding, he indulges in sweet memories about their life there. Finally, there is somebody else in his life who also serves as a great comfort to him. Harri develops a special relationship with a pigeon which, one day, lands on their balcony. He feeds it, takes care of it and starts communicating with it in secret. Harri thinks of this pigeon as his guardian, providing him with much needed guidance and protection.

Keep to the left (everywhere). The right is out of bounds.
The library stairs are safe.

Sadly enough, the killing is only the tip of the iceberg, as the streets of Harri's neighbourhood are rife with aggression and crime. The other kids keep telling him that there is a war but to start with he admits, quite innocently, that he has not seen one yet. Before long, however, he comes to understand what they have been trying to tell him. He needs another list to keep track of all the conflicts, or wars, in his local community:

Kids vs. Teachers
Northwell Manor High vs. Leadbridge High
Dell Farm Crew vs. Lewsey Hill Crew
Emos vs. Sunshine
Arsenal vs. Chelsea
Black vs. White
Police vs. Kids
God vs. Allah

Another pressing concern for Harri is how to deal with the Dell Farm Crew, the gang controlling the kids at his school. He is fascinated by their power and not least their leader X-Fire:

The steps outside the cafeteria belong to the Dell Farm Crew. Nobody else is allowed to sit there.

They're the best spot in the whole school. They're under the roof so you don't get wet when it rains and you can see the whole school from there so your enemy can't sneak up on you.

Only year 11 can even go near there and only if X-Fire invites you. [...] X-Fire is the leader because he's the best at basketball and fighting. Everybody agrees. He has chooked* the most people. (*stabbed)

When X-Fire offers him membership in the gang on condition that he carries out a job for them, Harri is truly flattered but he fails to carry out the assigned task and learns that to the Dell Farm Crew this is no game. Subsequently Harri is constantly threatened and bullied by the members of the gang.

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resurrecting his friend. His conclusion "It didn't work this time" is a great example of how his dry humour is used to alleviate our distress.

Harry is special but at the same time just an ordinary eleven-year-old who greatly admires the cycling skills of an older boy. No matter how troubled his neighbourhood might be, Harri's life revolves around school, sports, family and friends, just like it does for any other boy his age.

It is entirely in character for Harri to be so disappointed about the failure of the police to catch the killer that, together with a friend, he decides to carry out a private investigation into the killing. The plot of *Pigeon English* is structured around the progression of their investigation, but the two detectives are too successful for their own good and eventually get into great trouble. Only when it is too late does Harri understand how dangerous it is to know too much. Inevitably, the outcome is tragic, but I shall not reveal any more here.

Even though Harri is energetic and resourceful, he has to work hard to adapt to living in London. Considering his age, his efforts are impressively systematic. In order to make sense of the do's and don'ts of his new school he lists the rules he has learnt:

No running on the stairs.
No singing in class.
Always put your hand up before you ask a question.
Don't swallow the gum or it will get stuck in your guts and you'll die.
Jumping in the puddle means you're a retard. (I don't even agree with this one).
Going around the puddle means you're a girl.
The last one in closes the door.
The first one to answer the question loves the teacher.
If a girl looks at you three times in a row it means she loves you.
If you look at her back you love her.
Don't eat the soup. The dinner ladies pissed in it.

The pigeon also has a voice of its own in the novel:

I watched the sun come up and saw the boy off to school, I start every day with the taste of his dreams in my mouth. The taste of your dreams. You look so blameless from up here, so busy. The way you flock around an object of curiosity, or take flight from an intrusion, we're more alike than you give us credit for. But not too alike.

The passages narrated by Harri's pigeon function as a device to make the novel's thematic concerns more universal.

By addressing the reader and not just Harri, a more explicitly philosophical perspective is introduced. To me this seems to be a somewhat forced attempt to make the novel more sophisticated or literary, if you like. Quite a few of these passages sound pompous and seem out of place, so I regret to say that this particular aspect of the narrative is not all that successful. Even so, *Pigeon English* is still a novel worth reading, and my answer to the inevitable question raised by every conscientious English teacher is "Yes, oh dear yes, this novel is an excellent choice for classroom use."

8 August 2011: A woman jumps from a burning building in Surrey Street, Croydon. Riots and looting had broken out all across Greater London and were spreading across the country following the shooting of Mark Duggan by police in Tottenham, North London, on 4 August. (©NTB scapix)

